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INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1460  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0444

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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W ACOOK  
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SUBJECT: BENIN: OPPOSITION AND HEALTH UNIONISTS LEAD PROTEST MARCH  
AGAINST HEALTH POLICY

REFERENCE: A) COTONOU 200; B) COTONOU 222

¶1. SUMMARY: On May 28, health unionists and members of the G13, G4 and Force Key opposition groups in Cotonou led a protest march against the government's failure to satisfy health workers' claims, including the payment of incentive bonuses. While protesters blamed the government for showing a lack of concern regarding their demands, the Minister of Health reiterated the government's commitment to improving their condition. President Yayi's supporters have viewed the unexpected participation of the contentious opposition in the protest as a political maneuver to hijack unionists and to blemish the president's popularity ahead of the 2011 presidential elections. As a result of this, the newly created pro-Yayi Union for Presidential Plural Majority (UMPP) has embarked on a counteroffensive (Ref B). END SUMMARY.

¶2. On May 28, contentious opposition leaders Adrien Houngbedji, President of the Party of Democratic Renewal (PRD), Bruno Amoussou, President of the Social-Democracy Party (PSD), Sefou Fagbohoun, President of the African Movement for Democracy and Progress (MADEP), Issifou Saley, the leader of the G13 and Lazare Sehoueto, President of the Force Key Party, took the lead in a protest march against President Yayi's health policy that gathered an estimated 15,000 people, including health unionists, workers, politicians and supporters. Protesters chanted hostile slogans against Yayi's policy all along the way to the Ministry of Health. At the Ministry of Health, Benjamin Agon, the Spokesman for the protestors and Adrien Houngbedji, the PRD leader, respectively, issued a statement before the Minister of Health, Issa Takpara and his close collaborators. Mr. Agon cited the problems that the health sector faced and accused the government of disregarding health workers' demands. He urged the government to be considerate of workers' concerns rather than engaging in early electoral campaigning. Agon finally asked the government to engage frank and open negotiations with workers in order to find lasting solutions to their problems. Houngbedji read a vitriolic statement criticizing Yayi's health policy and pointing to his failure to revitalize the health sector and to honor his commitments to workers.

¶3. Minister Takpara agreed with health workers' demands and assured protesters that the government was gradually handling their requests. He said that though the government had started payment of incentive bonuses on May 26, workers decided to march on May 28. Houngbedji argued that the government's hasty decision to pay incentive bonuses from May 26 was an attempt to nip the march in the bud. On June 2, Health workers started a three-day strike with no minimum service.

¶4. The health sector has been experiencing slowdown strikes that have paralyzed the sector, causing death among patients due to lack of adequate health care. Workers' claims include payment of various allowances, provision of modern health equipment, and recruitment of contract workers by the civil service. However, reliable sources from the Ministry of Health have indicated that Yayi's government

has invested billions CFA in an effort to tackle the problems.

15. In response to the May 28 march, Candide Azannai, the Spokesman of the UMPP accused the opposition of manipulating and hijacking unionists for the sole purpose of discrediting Yayi's government. On May 30, Helene Aholou Keke, a Deputy of pro-Yayi FCBE, condemned, on television, the perceived politicization of labor unions by the opposition. She invited unionists to continue talks with the government and to distance themselves from political activists. In addition to this, the UMPP has announced that they will soon engage in nationwide outreach efforts to enlighten local communities.

16. COMMENT: The test of strength between Yayi's government and the contentious opposition persists through the May 28 march and the UMPP's subsequent response to it. Both the government and the opposition are likely putting in place the ingredients for social unrest ahead of the 2011 Presidential Election. END COMMENT.

RAWLINGS